

A Woman Speaks



SUMMARY

The speaker, a Black woman, describes her own underappreciated power, saying that she's a moon magically touched and changed by the sun, and yet her magic has never been written down. Even if her power has gone unrecorded, she says, when the tide goes out, the sand will be imprinted with her shape. She goes on to describe her attitude to the world: she doesn't want to accept any favors that aren't marked with violent passion, powerfully inescapable as love, or enduring as her mistakes and her ego. She doesn't dilute her love with flimsy pity, nor her hatred with petty contempt. *If you're interested in knowing who I am, she tells the reader, you'll have to peer into the exposed guts of the god Uranus, where you'll find a stormy ocean.*

The speaker goes on to say that her identity doesn't rest in the circumstances of her birth or her goddess-like power. She feels both eternal and not quite mature yet, and she's still looking for her lost sisters, sorceresses from a now-vanished kingdom in West Africa; she feels these women carrying her in the folds of their clothes, just as their shared mother carried her grief.

The speaker concludes that she's been a woman for ages, and warns the unwary to watch out for her dangerous smile. Her witchy power makes her likely to betray her enemies, and she feels a burning, growing rage against white women's exclusionary visions of a better future. She herself, she proclaims, is a woman, and she is not white.

society has gone unrecorded and underappreciated. And yet, she continues, “when the sea turns back, / it will leave [her] shape behind.” This [metaphor](#) seems to capture the speaker’s impact and erasure at the same time: on one level it might imply that when the tide turns (i.e., when a great shift occurs, such as racial or feminist progress), Black women will be left behind. At the same time, however, it suggests that even as her “magic” goes “unwritten,” her “shape” will leave an impression on the sands of progress. The speaker isn’t *doubting* that Black women have power, in other words; she’s arguing that this power hasn’t been fully appreciated.

Despite the ways Black women have been marginalized, the speaker still believes her identity as a Black woman is a source of great strength. She links herself to “witches in Dahomey” (an [allusion](#) to a kingdom that once existed in West Africa). These lost “sisters” (whom the speaker has been cut off from due to the legacy of slavery) “wear [the speaker] inside their coiled cloths.” This image seems to suggest an intimacy between the speaker and these “witches,” yet at the same time, the speaker says she does “not dwell” with them. In other words, the speaker feels both connected to and cut off from a lineage of powerful Black women.

The speaker goes on to say that she is “treacherous with old magic.” This line, along with the poem’s other references to “magic” and “witches,” might be [ironic](#)—the speaker winking at the ways in which Black women have been dehumanized by society, their power being seen as threatening, unnatural, and, [paradoxically](#), inconsequential. But the speaker *also* seems to be firmly laying claim to a “magic” unique to Black women, insisting on her own potential and power in a world that underestimates or outright ignores her.

The speaker goes on to imply that the only way Black women can hope to be included in progress is by speaking up for themselves. Black women are “promised” inclusivity, she says: a “wide future” that’s not just about equality for *white* women or Black men. Her “fury” at these promises suggests how empty they have proven and implies that she is tired of waiting for others to include Black women. The speaker says that she “seek[s] no favor / untouched by blood,” suggesting that she isn’t looking for the future to just be handed to her; she recognizes that she herself is going to have to work for it. And by ending on the proclamation “I am / woman / and not white,” the speaker affirms the power and agency of Black women, suggesting that the future is theirs to mold.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-34



THEMES



THE POWER AND MARGINALIZATION OF BLACK WOMEN'S VOICES

“A Woman Speaks” argues that Black women’s power and wisdom have long been ignored in the fight for progress and equality. Marginalized both in terms of gender *and* race, Black women have been historically left out of the “futures / promised” by white women (and, implicitly, Black men), their stories under-represented and their voices silenced. Yet the speaker affirms that the intersecting identity of being both a woman *and* Black is a source of deep, mysterious “magic.” The poem implies that if there is going to be any kind of worthwhile “future” for Black women, they themselves must be included in the making of it.

The poem suggests the ways in which Black women have been pushed to the margins of society. The speaker says that her “magic is unwritten,” for instance, implying that her influence on



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*Moon marked and ...
... my shape behind.*

In "A Woman Speaks," a Black female speaker will make a firm declaration about who she is—and who she is not. This will be a poem about identity, power, and pride, and about the ways in which Black women have often been shouted down or talked over even by their supposed allies.

The poem begins with the speaker describing herself, saying that she is the "moon marked and touched by sun." Right from the start, then, there's a feeling that the speaker lives in two worlds at once—as if she's diurnal, awake during both the day and the night. There's something rather magical about this image as well, which paints the speaker almost as a goddess, a "moon" in some kind of relationship with a [personified](#) "sun."

The speaker spells that magical atmosphere out in the very next line, when she says her "magic is unwritten": words that suggest she has a kind of secret supernatural power. The [alliterative](#) /m/ sounds in "Moon marked" and "magic" might even suggest a relationship between women's "magic" and the "moon" (the moon is commonly associated with femininity, motherhood, and feminine power in literature).

Let's take a step-by-step look at the complex [metaphor](#) of "unwritten" magic:

- This "unwritten" magic might suggest that Black women's power has often gone unrecognized. Lorde, who wrote this poem after a discouraging feminist conference, might have been thinking of the ways that white people have often excluded and erased Black women from literary and academic circles, appropriating or undervaluing their contributions.
- Then again, the speaker might be evoking African oral traditions, in which poems, stories, and history were passed along by word of mouth rather than written down. In this way, the poem might be taking pride in Black culture, saying that the speaker's power is no less meaningful because it doesn't look like white people's.

In short: there are a lot of ways to understand this metaphor, but they all gesture towards the simultaneous power and marginalization of Black women's voices.

The speaker then says that "when the sea turns back / it will leave [her] shape behind." This image is also ambiguous:

- It might suggest that the tide of progress is fickle, and when it changes, Black women will be left

behind—their needs and contributions will be forgotten.

- But the speaker might be saying almost the opposite: that when the tide changes, when the future unfolds, it will bear the mark of Black women's efforts.

LINES 5-9

*I seek no ...
... or my pride*

The speaker goes on to say that she "seek[s] no favor" that is "untouched by blood." As is the case with many of the lines in this poem, the speaker's meaning here is open to interpretation!

The word "favor" might refer to a good or kind deed (as in doing someone a favor), or it might refer to approval or esteem. Together with the phrase "untouched by blood," the speaker might be saying:

- She isn't looking for help from or the approval of people who don't have skin in the game—who aren't "touched" by blood (maybe literally in the sense of not being Black, or figuratively in the sense of not being personally, intimately devoted to the struggle the speaker describes).
- She doesn't expect things to just be handed to her without a fight (without blood, sweat, and tears).
- She might also be alluding to the long, brutal history of violence against Black women in America. In saying she isn't looking for "favor / untouched by blood," perhaps this means she isn't interested in the help/esteem of those who fail to *acknowledge* their own complicity in Black women's oppression—that is, those who pretend, consciously or not, that they don't have metaphorical "blood" on their hands (perhaps in the sense that they've benefitted from a position of privilege that elevates them above Black women in society).

It's also possible that the line "untouched by blood" is meant to be read separately from "I seek no favor." That is, maybe the line isn't actually [enjambéd](#), and the speaker is describing *herself* here (rather than the "favor") and saying that *she* is "untouched by blood"—pure.

The next line is similarly ambiguous:

- A "curse" is something people don't want and can't control. If the speaker seeks "no favor" that is as "unrelenting as the curse of love," she might be saying that she doesn't want pity (or perhaps help that's driven by obsession/lovesickness rather than level-headed dedication to a cause).
- Again, though, maybe the speaker is talking about

herself here: she is the one "unrelenting as the curse of love," meaning that she is tireless in her fight for Black women.

The final phrase in this list emphasizes the speaker's full humanity. She might that she's not interested in favors that are **only** as "permanent" as her "errors" and "pride." In other words, she might be saying that she doesn't want help/esteem that's contingent upon her always acting in one specific way—that only lasts as long as she remains a humble, infallible model of virtue rather than a human being who makes mistakes.

Notice the use of [parallelism](#) in lines 6-8:

untouched by blood
unrelenting as the curse of love
permanent as my errors

The parallel grammatical structures imply that these three lines are all essentially describing the same thing—either the "favor" the speaker knows better than to "seek," or the speaker herself. Parallelism also contributes to the rhythm of these lines, as does [alliteration](#) ("untouched" and "unrelenting," "permanent" and "pride.")

LINES 10-15

*I do not ...
... restless oceans pound.*

The speaker uses another set of [parallel](#) phrases here, saying that she doesn't mix "love with pity / nor hate with scorn." The speaker keeps her own feelings strong and uncompromised, in other words; she doesn't dilute them with flimsy, petty emotions like pity and scorn. Pity and scorn are also emotions that connote a feeling of superiority or condescension, so the speaker might be saying that she doesn't believe that you can properly "love" or "hate" someone while looking down on them/ failing to see them as equals.

The speaker then makes an [allusion](#) to Greek mythology, saying that if one wants to know her better, they need to "look into the entrails of Uranus / where the restless oceans pound."

- Uranus was the god of the sky. He and Gaea, the goddess of the earth, had many children together, whom Uranus imprisoned. Enraged, Gaea convinced one of her sons, Cronus, to castrate Uranus. After doing so, Cronos threw his father's genitals into the ocean.
- From the foaming blood of Uranus's wound came Aphrodite, goddess of love, pleasure, fertility, and sexuality.

The speaker thus presents herself as a powerful and distinctly feminine goddess, one borne from a devastated, incapacitated male god. She is someone who has triumphed over the

oppressive power of the patriarchy, represented here by Uranus. The image of those pounding, "restless oceans pound" further suggests the tireless work of Black women, who have often been at the helm of the fight against patriarchy.

LINES 16-20

*I do not ...
... my sisters*

In the second stanza, the speaker continues to explore her own history.

In saying that she doesn't "dwell," or live/linger, in her "birth" nor her "divinities," the speaker builds on the previous [allusion](#) to the goddess Aphrodite, whose "birth" and "divinit[y]" began with the castration of Uranus. This passage suggests that the speaker isn't content with simply breaking free of patriarchy, and also that her identity isn't defined solely by this action/moment. Instead, she's "still seeking" her "sisters"—perhaps her African heritage, from which the legacy of slavery separated her (the speaker will expand on this heritage in the following lines).

The [enjambment](#) here calls attention to this moment, not letting readers "dwell" on the word "dwell" itself but instead pushing them swiftly past the line break:

I do not dwell
within my birth nor my divinities

Saying in the next line that she's both "ageless" and "half-grown" suggests that she feels at once ancient and not yet mature. Perhaps this refers to the understanding that she's part of a continuum, a long legacy of powerful Black women, while also not yet able to fully *realize* that identity because she's been cut off from her ancestors—from her "sisters."

LINES 21-24

*witches in Dahomey ...
... mourning.*

The speaker says the "sisters" she is looking for are "witches in Dahomey." This is an [allusion](#) to a kingdom that existed for 300 years in West Africa before falling to French colonial powers. Dahomey was a major exporter of enslaved people during the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. But Dahomey was also famous for its powerful women warriors and its elaborate "Vodun" (sometimes spelled Voodoo) practices, hence the speaker's reference to "witches."

Witches in literature are often [symbols](#) of women who have strayed from sexist social norms—and been vilified and punished as a result. At the same time, witches have been embraced by feminists as symbolic examples of women finding power by breaking free from restrictive gender expectations. In linking herself to these "witches," then, the speaker is at once owning her own power and calling attention to the ways that

such power has been marginalized and ostracized.

The speaker goes on to say that these women "wear" the speaker "inside their coiled cloths," a [metaphor](#) suggesting that the speaker feels protected by her ancestors, wrapped up in their very clothes. The crisp, quick /c/ [alliteration](#) here evokes the tightness of those headpieces or robes and thus just how close the speaker feels to these women, even across an ocean and hundreds of years.

The final lines of this stanza—"as our mother did / mourning"—suggest that part of what connects the speaker and these unseen "sisters" is the loss they share. Just as their "mother" grieved the children who were captured and sold into slavery, these long-separated "sisters" mourn their separation from each other.

LINES 25-34

*I have been ...
... and not white.*

In the third stanza, the speaker says,

I have been woman
for a long time

Note the lack of an article before the word "woman," which suggests that the speaker isn't identifying as a particular, specific woman, but rather as the *idea* of "woman" in general. She represents womanhood itself just as much as any white woman, and she has "for a long time"—even if her identity has been erased or overlooked.

The speaker's warning to "beware [her] smile" feels [ironic](#) and earnest at the same time. On the one hand, it plays into racist ideas of Black people as inherently dangerous and deceitful, gesturing to the ways that white women have often looked upon Black women with fear and distrust. At the same time, the speaker is in a very real sense saying that if white women continue refusing to take Black women seriously, then they had better watch out—Black women are done putting up with their mistreatment.

Similarly, the speaker's claim that she is "treacherous with old magic" nods toward the trope that Black women can tap into ancient magic and teases white people for feeling uncomfortable with Black power. This builds off the mention of "Dahomey" earlier in the poem, which again was known for its "Vodun" practices; perhaps the speaker is poking fun at the way white people worry about having such "old magic" unleashed on them.

And yet, the phrase "old magic" also feels sincere: the speaker does in fact have access to a source of power in the sense that she can tap into a history of rage. Black women have been marginalized and mistreated for so long that their anger has become "noon's new fury"—as bright and powerful as the

midday sun. The intense [alliteration](#) and [assonance](#) here ("noon's new") emphasize the importance of this moment; if Black women are furious, that "fury" is going to be felt. Also note that light is a common [symbol](#) of truth, illumination, and knowledge. The poem suggests that Black women are reaching the height of their power and that their righteous "fury" will lead to a "new" day.

The speaker is then very explicit about what it is that has invoked Black women's fury: the bright "futures / promised" by feminism that never actually delivered. That is, for all of feminism's "promises" about how "wide" and inclusive these "futures" will be, they are never quite "wide" enough to include Black women.

But any future without Black women is no future—no progress—at all. In the poem's final moments, the speaker demands her place at the table, insisting that womanhood isn't solely the province of whiteness.



SYMBOLS



MAGIC AND WITCHES

The poem's images of magic and witches [symbolize](#) the ways Black women are both powerful and marginalized.

In feminist literature, witches often represent the ways that women who deviate from sexist social expectations are ostracized, villainized, and punished for their differences. At the same time, feminists have embraced the symbolism of witches to show how women have found empowerment through breaking from such expectations.

This poem makes a similar move, depicting the Black speaker and her "sisters" as powerful witches with "unwritten" magic at their disposal. But this idea might also gesture to the ways that white women whose bright "futures" the speaker looks at so skeptically have mistreated and vilified Black women in the same ways that men have mistreated and vilified them.

The poem's witch symbolism suggests that Black women might often have been ostracized, but they're also powerful—and if white women are unwilling to take Black women seriously, then they had better "beware."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "my magic is unwritten"
- **Line 21:** "witches in Dahomey"
- **Line 28:** "I am treacherous with old magic"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) gives the poem rhythm, musicality, and meaning. Take a look at the opening lines, for instance:

Moon marked and touched by sun
my magic is unwritten

The muted /m/ alliteration here perhaps suggests the muffled quality of the speaker's "unwritten," or unappreciated, "magic."

Listen, too, to the intense alliteration in this passage from the second stanza:

and still seeking
my sisters
witches in Dahomey
wear me inside their coiled cloths

The [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds in "still seeking / my sisters" draw whispery attention to the important idea of Black sisterhood, while the tight /c/ sounds of "coiled cloths" sound a lot like what they describe: the intricate curls of robes or headscarves. The /w/ of "witches" and "wear," meanwhile, adds some plain old musical intensity to this striking image of a sisterly group of Black witches communicating across generations.

In the last lines of the poem, meanwhile, the /w/ alliteration in "woman" and "white" highlights the way that the word "woman" is all too often assumed to mean "white woman": the poem suggests that women of color, and Black women in particular, are often treated as non-women, left out of a lot of so-called feminist "progress."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Moon," "marked"
- **Line 2:** "my," "magic"
- **Line 6:** "untouched"
- **Line 7:** "unrelenting"
- **Line 8:** "permanent"
- **Line 9:** "pride"
- **Line 16:** "do," "dwell"
- **Line 17:** "divinities"
- **Line 19:** "still," "seeking"
- **Line 20:** "sisters"
- **Line 21:** "witches"
- **Line 22:** "wear," "coiled," "cloths"
- **Line 23:** "mother"
- **Line 24:** "mourning"
- **Line 29:** "noon's," "new," "fury"
- **Line 30:** "futures"
- **Line 33:** "woman"

- **Line 34:** "white"

METAPHOR

The poem uses [metaphors](#) to evoke both the power and marginalization of Black women.

In line 2, for instance, the speaker says that her "magic is unwritten." This metaphor can be interpreted in a couple of different ways:

- On the one hand, it implies that the speaker's power is unrecognized and unappreciated. The fact that it isn't "written" seems to point to the ways that literature and academia have excluded the work of Black women, rendering Black women's voices practically inaudible.
- But the metaphor here might also speak to African oral tradition. Though many cultures have relied on and valued oral history and storytelling, white culture has often treated it as somehow less sophisticated or important than written literature.
- Both of these interpretations, then, suggest the marginalization of Black women's voices.

Later, the speaker refers to "witches in Dahomey" as "sisters," close family who "wear" the speaker "inside their coiled cloths." This metaphor suggests that the speaker feels protected and beloved by her African ancestors—women whose names she'll never know, as their identities were lost to slavery. In this image, these powerful witchy women nonetheless keep the speaker as close to them as their garments, in an intimacy that crosses miles and centuries.

The speaker also says she is "treacherous with old magic / and the noon's new fury":

- This plays into the idea that Black women have some special source of ancient magic—and pokes fun at white discomfort with Black female power. Some white people, this metaphor hints, might fear that the Black women they've hurt and oppressed will turn that "old magic" against them.
- At the same time, the metaphor here evokes a very real source of power: the rage Black women carry over being treated so heinously for so long. The speaker seems to imply that this rage is as intense as the sun at its "noon" zenith.
- Light is often associated with truth and illumination, so this full scorching sun perhaps indicates that a new age is dawning, one in which Black women will be seen, heard, and recognized.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "my magic is unwritten"
- **Lines 16-17:** "I do not dwell / within my birth nor my divinities "
- **Lines 20-24:** "my sisters / witches in Dahomey / wear me inside their coiled cloths / as our mother did / mourning."
- **Lines 28-29:** "I am treacherous with old magic / and the noon's new fury"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's [enjambments](#) help to create tension and drama.

For example, look at what happens in lines 10-11:

I do not mix
love with pity

Breaking this sentence in the middle at a place where one wouldn't pause in everyday speech, the speaker creates a moment of suspense: the reader is left to wonder what the speaker is about to say. This choice also means the powerful words "love" and "pity" get a line to themselves, inviting readers to think about the differences between these two types of feeling. Love, to this speaker, is about as far away from paltry (and perhaps condescending) "pity" as you can get.

The speaker even repeats a similar move in a moment of [parallelism](#) at the beginning of the second stanza:

I do not dwell
within my birth nor my divinities

Here, the enjambment frames a more complex and mysterious idea. Now, readers are asked to think about what it might mean to "dwell" (that is, live) inside one's "birth" or "divinities"—multifaceted ideas that could suggest all kinds of different things. Perhaps, for instance, the speaker is saying she doesn't get her identity from either the circumstances she was born into or her spirituality—an idea that leads into her point that she's "still seeking" a kind of connection with lost "sisters."

Enjambments thus set the poem's pace, drawing readers' attention to thought-provoking moments.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "favor / untouched"
- **Lines 8-9:** "errors / or"
- **Lines 10-11:** "mix / love"
- **Lines 16-17:** "dwell / within"
- **Lines 18-19:** "half-grown / and"
- **Lines 19-20:** "seeking / my"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Dahomey / wear"
- **Lines 22-23:** "cloths / as"

- **Lines 25-26:** "woman / for"
- **Lines 28-29:** "old magic / and"
- **Lines 30-31:** "futures / promised"
- **Lines 32-33:** "am / woman"

SIMILE

The poem's [similes](#) make the point that no "favor" is worth anything to the speaker if it doesn't allow her to be a complete human being—a point that suggests she's tired of the kind of condescending "favors" that white feminism has offered her, and tired of having to be "in favor" with people who think of themselves as different or better than her.

In lines 7-9, the speaker says that she's not interested in favors that are:

unrelenting as the curse of love
permanent as my errors
or my pride

Take a look at these similes one by one:

- The idea that a favor might be "unrelenting as the curse of love" is pretty ambiguous. Calling "love" a "curse" reflects the idea that love can feel like an unbreakable, painful spell—something that people don't want to feel. This phrase might suggest that suggests that the speaker is tired of pity.
 - Alternatively, this line might actually be separate from the "seek no favors" bit—the poem's phrasing is open to either reading! In this one, the line refers to the speaker herself, and it's saying that she is the one who is "unrelenting as the curse of love." She won't stop fighting for what she believes in.
- The next line is similarly ambiguous: it might refer to the "favor" from earlier in the poem, or it might refer to the speaker herself.
 - In the first reading, the speaker might be saying that she's not interested in any favor that's *only as* "permanent as my errors / or my pride," which suggests the speaker isn't interested in any favor contingent on her being a paragon of virtue—that is, a favor that only lasts as long as she behaves a certain way.
 - The speaker might also be saying that she wants the people she interacts with to take her as she is: a complete human being with an ego, one who will inevitably make mistakes.
 - Those things are "permanent" parts of her, and she only

wants the kind of "favor" (or approval) that sticks even if she isn't toeing some virtuous line.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "unrelenting as the curse of love / permanent as my errors / or my pride"

ALLUSION

The poem's [allusions](#) blend magic and myth with history, evoking the speaker's sense of her own boundary-breaking power.

The first allusion appears in lines 13-15, where the speaker tells readers to "look into the entrails of Uranus" if they want to know her better. This passage alludes to a story from Greek mythology:

- When Uranus, the god of the sky, imprisoned the earth goddess Gaea's children, Gaea convinced the god Cronos, one of her and Uranus's sons, to castrate his father. Cronos did so and threw Uranus's severed genitals into the sea.
- Aphrodite, the goddess of love, sex, and pleasure, was then born from the mixture of flesh, blood, and seafoam.

This allusion evokes the speaker's anti-patriarchal attitudes: she sees herself as a powerful goddess born of a maimed and incapacitated old male god (a figure who sounds a lot like the patriarchy itself). The poem's reference to the "restless oceans" might thus also suggest the power of Black women, who throughout history have risen against their oppressors.

In the third stanza, meanwhile, the speaker describes her "sisters" as "witches in Dahomey":

- Dahomey was a kingdom in West Africa that thrived for three centuries before being crushed by French colonial rule.
- It was also a hub of the transatlantic slave trade; many enslaved people were kidnapped and shipped out from Dahomey.
- The fact that the speaker is "still seeking" her "sisters" in Dahomey thus suggests that she's reaching out for a connection with powerful ancestors—ancestors whose names the atrocities of slavery erased from recorded history.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "and if you would know me / look into the

entrails of Uranus / where the restless oceans pound."

- **Lines 20-21:** "my sisters / witches in Dahomey"

PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) helps to give the speaker's voice its punch.

For instance, in lines 6-7, the speaker declares that she "seek[s] no favor":

untouched by blood
unrelenting as the curse of love
permanent as [her] errors

All of these adjectives—"untouched," "unrelenting," and "permanent"—seem to describe the "favor" the speaker isn't "seek[ing]". The parallel grammatical structures highlight the point the speaker is trying to make, which is that she doesn't expect any real "favor[s]" at all—especially from people who won't accept her "errors" and "pride" (qualities that make her human), or who deliver a side-helping of "blood" and violence with their supposed benevolence. (It's also possible to read "untouched by blood" as referring to her wanting only favors by people with actual skin in the game.)

The speaker goes on:

I do not mix
love with pity
nor hate with scorn

Here, parallelism draws attention to the way that racism or sexism can cause something as pure as "love" or "hate" to get "mix[ed]" up with weak and petty feelings like "pity" or "scorn." To the speaker, this is unacceptable: she's interested only in uncut and uncompromising feelings.

Meanwhile, at the end of the poem, the speaker's [anaphora](#) on the words "I am" makes it clear she's making firm, conclusive statements about her own power: "treacherous" and dangerous as a witch, she's also "woman / and not white," with an identity that might seem frightening to the close-minded white feminists this poem implicitly criticizes.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "untouched by blood / unrelenting as the curse of love / permanent as my errors"
- **Lines 10-12:** "I do not mix / love with pity / nor hate with scorn"
- **Line 16:** "I do not dwell"
- **Line 28:** "I am"
- **Line 32:** "I am"

ASSONANCE

Moments of [assonance](#) give the poem a musical, spell-like sound that fits right in with its visions of Black women's power.

For instance, listen to the music of the first few lines:

Moon marked and touched by sun
my magic is unwritten
but when the sea turns back
it will leave my shape behind.

The heavy /uh/ sound of "touched," "sun," and "unwritten" feels dark and mysterious, appropriate for lines about secretive (and/or disregarded) "magic." The long /ee/ of "sea" and "leave," meanwhile, draws musical attention to the idea that the sea will "leave [the speaker's] shape behind"—a complex image that might at once suggest the speaker will leave a mark in the sand, and that she'll be *left behind*, abandoned.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "touched," "sun"
- **Line 2:** "unwritten"
- **Line 3:** "sea"
- **Line 4:** "leave"
- **Line 5:** "seek"
- **Line 6:** "untouched," "blood"
- **Line 7:** "unrelenting," "love"
- **Line 8:** "permanent"
- **Line 9:** "my pride"
- **Line 14:** "into," "entrails"
- **Line 26:** "time"
- **Line 27:** "smile"
- **Line 29:** "noon's new"
- **Line 30:** "futures"



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Woman Speaks" doesn't follow a traditional form (such as a [villanelle](#), for example), but instead uses organic [free verse](#). The poem's 34 lines are divided into three stanzas of varying lengths. The lines tend to be on the shorter side, and many are just a few words long: the speaker sounds as if she's choosing her words carefully, giving every new idea its own space. This fits right in with the idea that the speaker is a representative for Black women, whose voices have been historically ignored, underrepresented, and silenced; the poem's short, powerful lines demand the attention the world has often denied the speaker and her "sisters."

METER

Like many 20th-century poems, "A Woman Speaks" is written in [free verse](#), meaning that it doesn't follow any set [meter](#). As a poet who was first and foremost an activist, Lorde was known for writing poems that were meant to speak truth to a wide audience in accessible, everyday language. Unmetered free verse was one way to make poetry feel conversational and down-to-earth. Lorde's poetry also picked up on Black art traditions, using rhythms inspired by Black music (such as blues and jazz) and African oral traditions. This poem, with its short, powerful, rhythmic lines, is a good example!

RHYME SCHEME

Like much [free verse](#) poetry, "A Woman Speaks" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). While lots of 20th-century poetry doesn't use rhyme, the lack of rhyme in this poem feels especially apt: a rhyme scheme might seem too mannered in a poem that aims to use direct, approachable language to communicate Black women's power and anger.

A rhyme scheme might also have played into traditional white, European conventions about what a poem should be—conventions that Black women, in particular, have reason to mistrust, considering how unrepresented their voices have historically been in literature.



SPEAKER

Rather than give a more personal self-portrait, the poem's speaker focuses on shared identities: being a "woman / and not white." She thus isn't so much a single specific person as she is a voice for Black women in general.

When the speaker mentions her "sisters [...] / in Dahomey," for instance, she marks herself as one of many Black women seeking a connection with their history. Dahomey was a kingdom in West Africa that participated heavily in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, so the fact that the speaker is "still seeking"



VOCABULARY

Unrelenting (Line 7) - Unyielding; without pause.

Entrails (Line 14) - Guts, intestines.

Uranus (Line 14) - The Greek god of the sky.

Dwell (Lines 16-17) - Live in, inhabit.

Divinities (Lines 16-17) - Divine beings, gods.

Half-grown (Line 18) - Not yet grown up or matured.

Coiled (Lines 21-22) - Wound up in a spiral. The word here suggests elegantly draped clothes or headscarves.

Dahomey (Lines 21-22) - A West African kingdom that existed from 1600 to 1904. Dahomey was instrumental in the Atlantic slave trade, as it was a powerful kingdom that took many prisoners and sold them to Europeans.

her "sisters" there suggests that she is a Black woman who has been cut off from her heritage by slavery.

Her warning to "beware [her] smile" similarly suggests that she speaks for many Black women. This warning grows out of the speaker's "new fury," a growing, powerful rage at the empty "promise[s]" of a brand of feminism that has historically fought only for the rights and wellbeing of *white* women.

The speaker also describes herself as an embodiment of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, who was born when the severed genitals of Uranus, god of the sky, were flung into the sea. By telling the reader to "look" for her in "the entrails" (or exposed guts) of the patriarch Uranus, the speaker suggests that she wants to use her goddess-like power to destroy the oppressive systems that seek to dominate her.



SETTING

The poem has no physical setting, but it does conjure up some [symbolic](#) landscapes. For example, when the speaker mentions "the sea" and "the restless oceans," "the sea" might be read as the tide of social progress. The movement of "the restless oceans," meanwhile, might suggest that the work of activism is never done: Black women have been "pound[ing]" against a wall of sexism and racism for centuries.

The poem's lack of setting fits with the "ageless[ness]" and anonymity of the speaker, whom the reader doesn't learn a lot about other than that she has "been woman / for a long time." In other words, because the speaker isn't a single, specific person, but a voice for Black women throughout history, the poem's setting is also not defined or specific, but timeless. This poem's speaker might exist anywhere, at any time: the point is that she refuses to be silent. Wherever she is in the world, she is making herself heard.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Audre Lorde (1934-1992) wrote "A Woman Speaks" in 1984 after attending a feminist conference in London where, [she said](#), "for a week, over and over again, [she] was [...] made, very very conscious of the ways in which Black women and white women do not hear each other." That same year, she performed the poem at an annual conference at Amerika House in Berlin, Germany. It was published in the posthumous book *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (1997).

Like much of Lorde's work, the poem speaks directly to issues of identity—in this case, gender and race, though she also wrote extensively about being queer, fat, and a mother. And like most of her work, this poem falls into the category of "protest poetry"—poetry that aims to provoke social and political

change, using direct, ordinary language that is accessible to everyone.

Lorde was an important member of the [Black Arts Movement](#), an artistic and cultural movement that arose in the 1960s and '70s. Like the [Harlem Renaissance](#) of the 1920s and '30s, the Black Arts Movement sought to move away from European artistic conventions and toward new forms based on Black history and culture. Poets such as Lorde, [Nikki Giovanni](#), [Gwendolyn Brooks](#), and Amiri Baraka introduced blues and jazz rhythms into their work and focused on writing for ordinary Black audiences rather than white literati.

Lorde's work had and continues to have an enormous impact on feminist activism, inspiring countless Black women (especially queer Black women) to find their voices despite the obstacles they face.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lorde was born in Harlem, New York, in 1934. She grew up during the Great Depression, and as she came of age, the Civil Rights Movement was just beginning to grip the United States. Lorde took part in the protests against racial discrimination that were occurring all across the country, and in the 1960s she became an important figure in both literary and activist spaces.

These spaces, however, were often co-opted by white women who did not experience the same kind of oppression as Black women: white women suffered from sexism, but Black women suffered from racism, too—including the racism of white feminists. Unfortunately (and not [unironically](#)), Lorde was often treated poorly by white feminist academics, accused of being too radical for her own good.

Lorde's own experiences as a Black lesbian shaped her influential theory of intersectionality: the idea that people's intersecting identities (including their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on) impact their lives in overlapping and complicated ways. Lorde asserted that, for instance, a white woman is bound to have different experiences of oppression from a Black woman, just as a straight, cis, wealthy, thin, or able-bodied woman is going to have a different experience of oppression than a woman who is queer, trans, poor, fat, or disabled. Intersectional feminism stresses how important it is to understand that the most marginalized of people face multiple forms of oppression at the same time.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [An Introduction to the Poet](#) — Read a biography of Lorde (and more of her poetry) at the Poetry Foundation's website. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde>)

- [The Poem Aloud](#) – Watch a 1984 video recording of Lorde reading this poem. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h059j-vBKEw&t=31s>)
- [An Interview with Lorde](#) – Watch an interview in which Lorde discusses her work. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4rDL-xZ8N0>)
- [Lorde's Intersectional Feminism](#) – Read "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," the famous essay in which Lorde advocates for a more intersectional feminism—that is, feminism that considers how intersecting identities (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class) shape women's lives. (<https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lordedismantle.html>)
- [Angela Davis on Audre Lorde](#) – Watch a 2014 speech in which writer and activist Angela Davis discusses Lorde's influence. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpYdfcvYPEQ>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER AUDRE LORDE POEMS

- [A Litany for Survival](#)
- [Power](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "A Woman Speaks." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Dec 2021. Web. 17 Dec 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "A Woman Speaks." LitCharts LLC, December 7, 2021. Retrieved December 17, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/audre-lorde/a-woman-speaks>.